"We Just Put an Aircraft in the Bay!"

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By AME1 (AW) David B. Clouser

As I drove to work, I thought about what I had to face for the day. Maybe a 28-day pre-panel-up inspection, maybe a post-panel inspection, or maybe even some ejection-seat inspections or installations, which I always looked forward to.

We had our usual meeting to cover the day's launches, inspections and wrenchwork. Everything seemed fine as I left maintenance control for the QA work center to begin my routine as A-6E full-systems QAR. The squadron was doing field carrier landing practice (FCLP).

A call went out for troubleshooters for the three-plane launch. Since I was the only QAR available, I grabbed my cranial and headed for the flight line. Once there, I did my usual survey: no FOD on the GSE, everyone suited up, tool pouches FOD-free. The three-plane go left without incident. Smooth as silk.

I walked inside to maintenance to review the aircraft discrepancy books (ADBs). That's where all semblance of a normal day ended. I had gotten through my second ADB when three officers in flight suits looking rather rushed and panicked barged in asking, "What the hell just happened? Did the aircraft call in?"

I said, "No everything's fine as far as I know. Why, what's wrong?"

"He went in," the pilot replied. "We just put an aircraft in the bay. Don't touch any more ADBs,"

I heard the other aircraft coming back, and I rushed out to the flight line where a crowd was already forming and the gossip beginning. I walked up to the wingman pilot and asked, "Were there any chutes? Did you see them eject?"

He said, "No, I didn't see any seats," as he kept walking past me into the hangar. I couldn't believe this was happening. I had just seen the crew not 10 minutes earlier during the launch. What happened? Had I really checked everything as carefully as I could? Had I missed anything? Things around the hangar were moving fast. I started seeing people I didn't recognize coming into the hangar. There were so many that the guy on duty at the main entrance couldn't keep up.

A chaplain showed up and was randomly checking to see how everyone was feeling. The plane captains were hit the hardest, because I saw the chaplain talking to them the most. None of it seemed real, and I was having difficulty knowing where I needed to be.

I soon found out.

A call went out for all members of the reclamation team and shop supervisors to muster on the hangar deck. We were told about the crash. As soon as more information came in, we would hear that, too. We broke ranks, and the gossip continued.

Initial reports were that neither the pilot nor the BN had survived. I hoped that wasn't so. Another call told me to report to maintenance ASAP. "Uh, oh," I thought, "What was that about?"

One of the officers was trying to assemble a salvage team. The people hanging around in maintenance didn't look good. Some were visibly upset as they tried to carry on with the task at hand. The officer put me in charge of a team that had to go out in boats and start collecting anything we could find. I was selected because I was familiar with the ordnance in the seats. My heart sank. To know that something had happened was bad enough. Now I had to go pick up the bits and pieces. I told everyone from the team to report to the duty office with their tool boxes.

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Anticipation and fear rose as we boarded the boats to go out to the wreckage in the bay, mostly because none of us knew what we would find. We were silent as we prepared ourselves. We headed out in two boats. I rode with the OinC, and the rest were in a platform boat. The anxiety rose when we saw another boat on its way in, hauling part of a flap and other small parts with them. That crew was from another squadron dispatched from the base to assist.

We pressed on to the area where the wreckage was supposed to be and got down to work. With the smell of JP-5 jet fuel hanging in the air, the area was peppered with unrecognizable parts. I couldn't imagine the force it took to do that to a war machine – not until I gathered up a lox bottle that was normally enclosed in its metal cocoon in the tail of the aircraft. We collected parts of a fuel bag, honeycomb wing parts galore, a helmet, kneeboard maps and the like. Once we had gotten what appeared to be everything, we headed back to the staging area in the hangar. I still wondered about the crew.

Once I got back, I learned that a fisherman had found the crew immediately after the crash. The pilot had died during efforts to revive him, and the BN had been killed instantly. My question about the seats was answered by one of the investigating officers who reassured me that the seats did work, but the crew had been out of the envelope. None of the seats was recovered.

As the next 30 days of salvage by the divers passed and the wreckage stored in a hangar next door piled up, I was startled by the amount of unrecognizable debris. It took three or four tri-wall boxes to hold all of it, and the hangar deck was still completely covered with parts of an imaginary puzzle that couldn't be assembled.

When I got home that afternoon, my wife had been watching the news. I was shocked at how much attention the mishap got. Images flashed across the screen of us collecting debris, the pilot getting CPR from Coast Guard personnel on shore. My father called to ask what happened. My wife and her friend watched the whole thing like a TV show, and even she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Time has not diminished the impact of what happened that day, and the memory makes me more careful. Nearly every job I take on at work is a subtle reminder of that day, and I find myself being much more meticulous, mainly because I don't want to revisit that day.

AME1(AW) Clouser was with VA-304 at the time of this mishap. He is now with VR-46.